

Living the Word: Exodus 12.1-14

People eat meals together for many reasons. Travellers might share the same table with those they come across on a stop during their journeys. Some of us might regularly share a table with people we work with. And families regularly get together to share food and fellowship on special occasions. Every time we come to Mass, we become partakers in the Last Supper. And this celebration, ordered by the Lord during the days before he suffered, echoes the orders of God to Moses to institute a meal in remembrance of great deeds that the Lord was to do to liberate his people. As the Passover story helps to mould the Jewish people into a nation, so the Last Supper and celebrations of Mass are central to moulding the Christian family together. Remember as you approach the altar today, and indeed every time that you receive Communion, to give thanks for your invitation to play a part in this remembrance.

Elements of the Mass: Foot washing

The 'Pedilavium' (Latin 'washing of the feet') during the Liturgy of Maundy Thursday is derived from the Lord's own actions during the Last Supper according to the account in John's Gospel chapter 13. As the 'Farewell discourse' which follows this account (Chapters 14 and 15) makes clear, the action of washing the disciples' feet, dirty from the Jerusalem streets, an action normally performed by a slave, was intended by Jesus as a tangible, almost sacramental expression of his New Commandment, 'that you love one another as I have loved you'. Jesus also explicitly encouraged his disciples to go on and 'wash one another's feet.' The practice of foot washing is first mentioned in connection with a synod at Toledo in 694. When later in the Middle Ages the Maundy Thursday Mass was moved to the morning, the Pedilavium remained as a separate service, confined mainly to monasteries and cathedrals (as it is in Eastern Orthodox practice to this day). In the 1950's Pope Pius XII placed the foot washing in the restored evening Mass, immediately after the homily, from where it has returned to Anglican practice. In England, the monarch washed the feet of the poor on Maundy Thursday until the 18th century, when the ceremony was replaced by the giving of 'Maundy money'. The Pope has kept up the practice to this day, washing the feet of refugees, prisoners, and others whom society tends to overlook.

28th March 2024
Maundy Thursday



King David, overcome with joy at the arrival of God in Zion, clothes himself in simple but significant robes. 'And David danced before the Lord with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod' (II Samuel 6.14) The ephod was a garment worn by the priests in the temple when they performed holy rites in the presence of almighty God – Gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus invokes a similar image of one girding himself so as to perform a simple but holy rite. Unbeknown to his friends, he leaves them a memorial of his divine presence as he serves them and as he breaks the bread with them. 'He removed his outer garment, taking a towel, wrapped it around his waist; then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel' (John 13.4-5). The tabernacle, the Ark of God's presence among us remains empty without simple acts of self-giving love and service. As we celebrate the Last Supper let us clothe ourselves with humility and serve one another.

Today's Gospel: St. John 13: 1-15